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ABSTRACT

Twenty percent of the children enrolled in rural and small-town schools are non-Caucasian, children of color. As in nonrural schools, rural schools have yet to close the achievement gap across various racial and economic subgroups of this diverse population. Overall, rural students perform as well as or better than their nonrural peers on standardized achievement tests. However, the gap between White and non-White student performance levels is persistent, widening in the 1990s. Socioeconomic status is the strongest correlate of standardized test scores, and rural poverty rates are highest in areas with large concentrations of people of color--the deep South, Southwest, and American Indian reservations. Examples demonstrate correlations between academic performance and both parental educational attainment and student eligibility for free and reduced-priced lunch. Small schools have been shown to mitigate the influence of poverty on academic achievement, but in many places, small community schools also may be linked to school segregation. Equity issues affecting the achievement gap include overrepresentation of minority-group students in school suspensions and expulsions, nonacademic "tracks," and special education; their underrepresentation in gifted programs and advanced courses; inequitable funding of poor rural schools serving children of color; and the poorer teacher quality in such schools. Three examples depict rural districts where place-based, culturally relevant curricula have raised academic achievement by connecting schools to their Latino, Native, or African American communities. (Contains 20 references) (SV)

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CSR Connection

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Closing the Achievement Gap: Rural Schools

By Doris Terry Williams of the Rural School and Community Trust

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Closing the Achievement Gap: Rural Schools

By Doris Terry Williams of the Rural School and Community Trust

"Rural" to many Americans still evokes a 1930s image of White farmers struggling against nature's odds to scrape a living out of the earth. This image of racial homogeneity belies the fact that 21st Century rural America is considerably more diverse than that. Among African Americans, the term rural is more likely to evoke images of tenant farming and share cropping in the racially segregated South. For Hispanics, the image is likely to be one of migrant farm camps, long days, and endless rows of crops to be harvested. It might come as a surprise to some that people of color comprise a significant percentage of the rural population. In fact, of the more than 14 million children enrolled in rural and small town schools today, some 2.8 million or 20% of them are non-Caucasian, children of color (NCES, 1999). Like their non-rural counterparts, rural schools have yet to attain an acceptable level of success in educating and closing the achievement gap across the various racial and economic sub-groups of this diverse student population. The plight of rural children, and particularly rural children of color, however, is seldom raised in the public

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debate and almost never drives the public agenda. Consequently, rural schools often find themselves working against the odds with inadequate resources, inexperienced or poorly prepared teachers, as well as poor facilities and working conditions, to meet state-imposed standards and federal guidelines that they have had little voice in creating. Poor, hard-to-staff and high minority populated rural schools face an even more daunting challenge. Yet, there are flickers of hope as all across America, rural schools are combining what is good about being rural with creative leadership, emancipating pedagogy and promising reform strategies both to meet and exceed state standards and federal requirements.

The Rural Context: High Numbers of Poor and Minority Students

One-third of America's school children attend schools in rural areas or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people. Almost a quarter of them (21%) go to schools in places with fewer than 2,500 people. Nearly a third (31.3%) of public schools are found in areas with populations of less than 2,500 people (Beeson & Strange, 2003). In twelve states—Vermont, Maine, South Dakota, Wyoming, West Virginia, Alaska, Arkansas, Kentucky, Iowa, North Carolina, New Hampshire and Nebraska—rural and small town children are a majority in the public elementary and secondary school population (NCES, 2000).

Although rural students are predominately White, 2.8 million are members of other racial or ethnic groups—1.4 million (9.8%) are African American; 900,000 (6.3%) are Hispanic; 184,000 (1.3%) are Asian/Pacific Islander; and 337,000 (2.3%) are American Indian/Alaska Native (NCES, 1999). Except in the Delta counties of the Deep South, counties that had substantial numbers of people of color saw those numbers increase during the 1990s. Rural African American, Hispanic, and Native populations all grew as a result of natural increase, in-migration, and an overall stemming of out-migration (Beale, 1999). In eight states, more than a third of students attending schools in rural communities are children of color (Beeson & Strange, 2003).

While overall the rural population has become more diverse, demographics differ greatly from region to region. It is not hard to find rural schools where virtually all of the students are from a single ethnic or racial group. In Texas, for example, where over half of the regular public school children are non-White, it is not uncommon to find elementary and secondary schools along the Texas-Mexico border with greater than 98% Hispanic student enrollments (Texas Education Agency, 2002). Half of the nation's African American population and 91% of rural African Americans live in the South where segregation and economic conditions have perpetuated a pattern of predominately White and predominately African American counties, communities and schools (Kusimo, 1999).

These school demographics belie educational challenges as complicated as those of non-rural schools. Unless we consider our rural population superfluous, educating them well is immensely important and our educational policy and practice towards them matters much.

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Challenges and Opportunities of Rural Schools

Many researchers now agree that rural schools do as well as or better than their suburban and urban peers at educating students. Despite a lingering sense of inferiority in some places, rural students perform at or above the levels of their non-rural peers on standardized tests. Indeed, on average, rural children outperform non-rural children on math tests (Lee, 2001; Fan & Chen, 1999).

Side-by-side with this picture of relative equity between rural and non-rural students is the persistent and widening gap in White and non-White student performance levels. Poor test performance among African American students has been well documented in numerous large-scale studies. Gains made in the 1970s and 1980s were largely eroded in the 1990s. Using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), researchers saw the gap narrow more than 40% in some age groups and subject areas. However, the Fall 2000 NAEP data show very different trends. Even when socioeconomic status, parents' education levels and other factors that might influence achievement were controlled for, the gap between African American and White students' scores widened in every subject area and for every age group (Sadowski, 2001).

Similar disparities are apparent in Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores between 1990 and 2000. According to the College Board, which administers the SAT, nationally, the gap between White and African American student scores grew by three points in the verbal and eight points in the mathematics sections (Hoff, 2000). Although many rural states administer the SAT to statistically few students (less than 5%), the gaps in scores across racial and ethnic groups can still make for compelling arguments. In North Carolina, for example, from 1990 to 2002, mean SAT scores increased 50 points. Yet, in 2002, when some 12 percent of graduating seniors took the SAT, White (1046) and Asian (1025) students both scored above the national average (1020) while African American students scored, on average, 181 points below. Although the African American student mean score was four points higher than the year before, the gap between African American and White student scores was an astounding 207 points (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2002).

Further analysis of student performance on standardized tests reveals a complex web of contributing factors, socioeconomic status, school size, equity issues, and instructional quality among them.

Socioeconomic Status and Student Achievement

If one accepts standardized test scores as reliable indicators, then the strongest correlate of student achievement is socioeconomic status. Using income and parent education levels as indicators of socioeconomic status, there is little wonder that children of color and poverty perform poorly on standardized tests. And given the demography of rural America, there is little wonder that a gap exists between White and non-White children.

Rural Americans are generally poorer than their urban and suburban coun-

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terparts as rural earnings are 71% of urban earnings. In 2000, the percentage of families living in poverty in rural areas was 13.4 compared to 10.8 in metropolitan areas. Of the 200 persistently poor counties in the US, 195 (97.5%) are rural. Of the 66 poorest counties, 59 (89.4%) are rural. Child poverty rates in these counties run two to three times higher than the national average (Save the Children, 2002; Beeson & Strange, 2003).

Rural poverty rates are highest in areas of the country with large concentrations of people of color—the Deep South, the Southwest, and American Indian reservations in the Northern Plains—where family incomes and parent education levels are consistently lower than their White counterparts. More than 41% of the nation's poor live in the South. In 2000, more than half of poor rural children were children of color. In rural areas, roughly 33% of rural Hispanic children, 37% of African American and 44% of Native American children lived below the poverty line (Save the Children, 2002). Correspondingly, only 30% of rural Hispanic, 43% of rural African American, and 32% of rural Native American adults had finished high school (Proctor & Dalaker, 2002). While the data are consistent across states and racial and ethnic subgroups, two examples demonstrate well the correlation between socioeconomic status and academic performance. Again in North Carolina, considered a leader among states in the accountability movement, only 48.9% of public school students whose parents had not completed high school had composite end of course test scores indicating proficiency or above in the 2001-2002 school year. More than 72% of students whose parents had completed four years of college scored proficiency or above, a difference of some 22 percentage points. At the same time, there was a 30.7 percentage point difference between the number of African American and the number of White students scoring proficient or above (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2002).

Similarly, using qualification for free and reduced-price lunches as an indicator of socioeconomic status, subgroup performance scores on Louisiana's Electronic Assistance Program (LEAP) 21 Index averaged 64.9 for students receiving free and reduced-price lunches, compared to 95.9 for those who paid for their lunches, a difference of 31 points. For African American and White students, index scores were 55.7 and 98.0, respectively, a startling 42.3 point difference (Louisiana Department of Education, 2002).

Clearly socioeconomic status, highly correlated with race in the United States, has a direct correlation to student test performance. The negative impact is greatest among children of color, whose parent income and education levels have historically and persistently lagged behind even their poor White counterparts. The performance gap is thus unlikely to narrow substantially until these socioeconomic factors are addressed.

Small School Size

Rural schools' standardized test scores have come into relative alignment with those of non-rural schools through a combination of factors, not the least of which is small school size. Nearly 75% of rural schools are small, enrolling

fewer than 400 students; about 20% of them enroll fewer than a hundred students. Most rural districts, although geographically dispersed, are also small in that they serve relatively small numbers of students. The exception is in the Southeast where, depending on the state, between 25 and 62 percent of districts enroll over 2,500 students (Stern, 1994).

Researchers conducting statewide analyses of the effect of school and district size on student achievement in Alaska, California, Georgia, Ohio, Montana, Texas and West Virginia uncovered the mitigating effects of small school size on poverty's influence on student achievement. Again the results were consistent across states: small schools are better than large ones at educating students of low socioeconomic status. Small schools and districts give impoverished students an advantage that enables them to overcome many of the disadvantages of being poor (Howley et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2002; Stern, 1994).

As the research on small schools has emerged and gained notice, educators have begun to understand the reasons for their success. Small schools tend to compensate for their limited resources by creating supportive, safe and connected learning environments. They also tend to have lower student/teacher ratios, closer ties to their communities, higher graduation rates and lower rates of absenteeism, expulsion, crime and alcohol and drug abuse (Howley et al., 2000).

While small schools have been shown to be an effective strategy for addressing the achievement gap, a word of caution is in order. Small community schools in many places mean a continuation of or return to school segregation. This phenomenon is already evident in many places where students of one ethnic or racial group can complete their public school careers without ever coming in contact with members of other groups. One might expect this trend to continue as more and more school districts are awarded unitary status and are no longer compelled to bus students to achieve integration.

Equity and Fairness

School size is only one of a complex web of factors that must be addressed in closing the achievement gap. There are others—school suspensions and expulsions, tracking, over-identification for special education, inadequate funding, and a plethora of other debilitating factors and practices that disproportionately affect children of color. These are largely issues of equity and fairness that are played out daily in schools and school districts all across the country.

Again in North Carolina, African American males comprise 16% of the regular public school membership. Yet, they account for 44% of school expulsions and 41% of suspensions. Making up 31.2% of public school enrollment in the state, African American students account for only 10% of enrollment in elementary and middle school programs for academically gifted students, and only 8.7% of students taking advanced placement exams. At the same time, they account for 50.4% of students designated educable mentally handicapped (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2002).

Rural schools are greatly disadvantaged by the inequities inherent in and perpetuated by current school funding strategies. A number of states rely heavily on local property taxes to supplement state and federal funding. Because rural communities tend to have higher poverty rates, lower property values and less economic development, they are unable to raise adequate resources through this means. For example, North Carolina's ten most affluent counties have over $877,000 in taxable real estate per public school student, compared to only $208,000 per student in the ten poorest counties. This disparity in property wealth and school funding translates into inadequate school facilities and narrower curricular and co-curricular offerings. Just as importantly, it greatly restricts the ability of rural schools to compete for a shrinking supply of qualified teachers. In the end, the inequities caused by state school finance systems deny many rural students high-quality instruction, access to educational programs and services that might address the achievement gap, and equal educational opportunities (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2001).

The problems of inadequate funding and teacher quality are more pronounced in poor rural communities and schools where children of color make up a larger percentage of the student body. In one predominately African American school district in the Louisiana Delta, the superintendent commented on the inability of her school district to compete with wealthier districts for teachers. At a recent recruitment fair, she noted, her school's booth was set up beside districts that were paying teachers up to $7,000 more per year than her district could pay. Consequently, she was able to hold the attention of only two potential teaching candidates, neither of whom was certified.

Numerous reports have highlighted the frequency with which poor children and children of color are assigned less than qualified teachers. Hard-to-staff schools, in rural as in non-rural places, tend to be characterized by the presence of a high percentage of such children, high teacher turnover and a high percentage of out-of-field or ill-prepared teachers. In some districts, upwards of 50% of the teachers are less than fully certified in any subject area. Low student test scores should come as no surprise under such circumstances (Jerald, 2002).

These and other equity matters cannot be ignored in any serious effort to close the achievement gap between the privileged and the less privileged, between White and non-White students.

Quality Teaching

How are some rural places overcoming the odds? In addition to small school size, many rural districts have discovered the power of connecting school and community through a high-quality, culturally relevant curriculum. The Rural School and Community Trust calls this "place-based education"—teaching and learning that is rooted in the unique history, environment, culture and economy of a local place. A far more emancipatory practice than the increasingly narrow approaches that have resulted from the focus on externally imposed standards and high-stakes testing, place-based education incites both high academic

achievement and spirited civic engagement. Numerous examples around rural America verify that this focus on real-world relevance engages students across racial divides and benefits the communities in which they live.

Half the students at Edcouch-Elsa High School in Edcouch, TX, are migrant farm laborers. More than 90% of adults in the community do not have high school diplomas. But, under the leadership of Francisco Gujardo and the Llano Grande Center, many of them have defied the odds and gone off to study, on full scholarships, at the nation's most prestigious institutions. Even more impressive, they are returning to their communities, reconnecting with their schools, and making a major difference in the lives of their people. Students are intimately connected to the community as they work to reclaim their heritage. They do that, and develop high-level skills in the meantime, by interviewing their elders and publishing their stories in the bilingual Llano Grande Journal, publishing a monthly newsletter for the city of Elsa in Spanish and English, operating a language immersion institute, running a school-based radio station, and facilitating community visioning sessions that have led to substantial support for local community development efforts. The college-going rate among them nears 50%, up from 25% over a matter of a few years. Many are attending Ivy League and other prestigious institutions.

Educators in the Alaskan Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI) have used connections to the indigenous community to develop culturally responsive curricula that integrate native knowledge and cultural expectations with state content standards. Cultural knowledge and expectations help to shape teacher training, instructional practice, and the assessment of what children have gained from the K-12 learning experience. Elders are honored in the teaching and learning exchange, and their knowledge and active participation are sought after, validated and respected. Students and elders participate together in camps where students learn traditional subsistence practices, teachers and elders together develop curricula linking science and math to the environment, and students create multi-media presentations of their interviews with the elders. Four years of documentation show children participating in AKRSI schools and using place-based education netting greater test score gains than those who do not. Remarkable gains are reported for one school where three years ago test scores were among the lowest in the state and where nearly a third of students ages 12 to 16 were out of school. The principal now reports 100% student enrollment and substantially improved test scores and attributes the school's turnaround to place-based learning.

East Feliciana Parish is one of the poorest parishes in Louisiana. More than 80% of its nearly 3,000 students are African American, 42% of adults do not have high school diplomas, and a large percentage of teachers are not fully certified. Math and science test scores had been among the lowest in the state when school administrators and teachers adopted place-based learning as an improvement strategy. Students built and studied butterfly gardens on or near school campuses. For two years, middle school students have been testing the waters and charting the ecology of Pretty Creek. Test results have raised concerns about water quality and suspicion

about the source of the stream's pollution. Both school and community face important decisions about whether they will take action and how. In the meantime, the passage rate on the state's fourth grade science test increased by 13 percentage points in one year, matching the state's passing rate of 85% in 2001.

Conclusions

History has shown that racially separate schools are "inherently unequal" and integration has generally not effectively balanced the equation. For rural children of color particularly, the hope of Brown vs. the Board of Education has been frustrated by inadequate funding, unfair treatment, deliberate under-education through over-identification and assignment in special education and low-level courses, a pattern of assignment to the least qualified teachers, and disproportionately high rates of suspension and expulsion, often leading to drop out.

Now, nearly 50 years after Brown, the nation is embarking upon another sweeping venture that purports to be the remedy for the under-education of children of color and poverty. While few would take exception to the good will conveyed by the rhetoric of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the legislation has the potential to have an adverse effect on schools and students who most need attention. Yes, every child has the right to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. And yes, schools should be held accountable for teaching every child to his or her highest potential, regardless of race, disability, first language or socioeconomic status. Students, parents and communities must also be held accountable. But, to impose such rigid standards, without a realistic commitment of the resources needed to achieve them, will inflict further harm on the law's intended beneficiaries while destabilizing the public education system. The disaggregation of standardized test scores only affirms what we already know—that children of poverty and color do not perform as well on standardized tests as other students do. Efforts must be made to reduce the inequities and unfairness that have been perpetrated upon those students and to close the largely manufactured achievement gap in America's schools.

Recommendations

The research on the achievement gap in rural schools is sparse. Yet, rural schools offer many challenges and proven innovations that can inform national discussion and public policy on education. There is a need for further research on the nature and causes of the achievement gap in rural schools and for further research on the possible solutions to this persistent and growing problem.

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